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Why military preparedness?

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Why Military Preparedness?

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BY

FREDERIC R. COUDERT

WHY MILITARY PREPAREDNESS?

The world-stirring events of the past year and a half have aroused us from a kind of complacent somnolence in which dreams of world peace predominated to a definite realization that even America might at some time be forced into unexpected, unwished for conflict.

The belief that peace might be preserved on the basis of public law and that Treaties might be substituted for cannon has given place to a vivid realization that the predatory passions may flourish in a nation as in an individual and that when thoroughly aroused and coupled with immense military strength, phrases, professions, treaties and international law must yield to a supposed "law of necessity," finding expression in terms of shrapnel.

I heartily assent to the proposition that in a world-torn war the United States should champion the principles of international law. It must not, however, be forgotten that international law does not maintain itself but that like municipal law it is a thing to be scoffed at unless founded upon ultimate force somewhere. In last and final analysis it is always the policeman who must be the guarantor of order and the saviour of the State.

It is true that neutrals have rights and that these rights should be respected by belligerents but every right connotes a duty and it is a shameful thing for a neutral to clamor noisily about its rights unless it is ready to maintain its duties.

When we enter the domain of fact and leave that of legal fiction we must understand that the smaller nations of the world are impotent to maintain their rights under international law unless those rights are championed by the stronger members of the family of nations.

Until the outbreak of this war we Americans, as England and to some extent France, had felt protected by international law. But international law consists merely in the agreements or the customs assented to in the past by the nations, based upon reason and convenience but without any outside superior force to vindicate them.

Many a time have I heard the phrase: "The public opinion of Europe" will not permit certain things. We have since learned that the public opinion of Europe is a thing that did not exist save in the minds of theorists and that anything may be permitted against international law unless somewhere there lies some force willing to vindicate the rights accorded by that law.

The fact that the United States covets no territory, that it has no ambitious schemes of expansion, that it does not design to impose its theories, its culture or its fancies upon other peoples is not certain to protect it from unjust and unwonted aggression.

If America will not maintain its own rights, it may be quite certain that no other nation will do so. The United States has no friend willing to fight for it save itself; still our public has scarce even yet made the startling discovery that the United States has not the instrumentalities wherewith to defend itself against any great power or with which to assert those rights which it so emphatically proclaims as based not only upon international law but upon sacred principles of humanity.

It is because of this discovery that our people have been making, so reluctantly yet so surely, since August 1914, that the National Security League has been formed and asks public support. It is not the creation of a bellicose faction of military enthusiasts or Chauvinistic hotheads. It is an organization of citizens whose public and private activities are predicated upon their desire for honorable peace and their unswerving belief in the preservation of law, public and private, as the safety of society.

They now come to you in the same spirit in which Washington went to his first Congress recommending measures

> "for the fulfillment of our duties to the rest of the world,"

and

> "again pressing upon you the necessity of placing ourselves in a condition of complete defense and of exacting from them the fulfillment of their duties toward us."

The members of this Society have been criticized in somewhat irresponsible fashion as advocates of war and fomenters of international strife. It is evident that some of those who speak

thus flippantly about the matter have given it little thought, although others may belong to that category of persons who believe the use of force never justifiable, even though it be employed in the defense of national existence. With these I have no quarrel. They are admirable idealists, useful in times of "piping peace" where their number is so small as to have no appreciable effect upon legislation and where their propaganda is confined to the realms of the ideal.

There are others, however, who, while acquiescent in our possession of an army and navy, do not feel that it should be any larger or more efficient than at present. To the latter, the question must be one of fact, and if they are convinced of the inadequacy of our present defense, they must join with us in asking that the situation be rectified.

Our attitude is not new. It has been the position taken by the leading statesmen in this country since our Nation began and cannot be better exemplified than in the words of the Farewell Address, the origin of America's neutrality in old world conflicts. In a few words he has stated our motto:

> "If we desire to secure peace, one of the most powerful instruments of our rising prosperity, it must be known that we are at all times ready for war."

Jefferson maintained a similar attitude.

None of us believe in war, for the sake of war, and most of us are more or less acquainted with its horrors. What little I saw of war personally with our forces, both here and in the West Indies, certainly did not encourage me to love it. Our sad lack of preparation in the insignificant Spanish war cost us many lives, for disease and disorder were far more dangerous than the bullets.

What I saw last summer in France was infinitely more appalling—the arrival of the Belgians in Paris, the refugees on the road, the wounded dying in railroad stations, the misery of the war-orphans. I mention these facts so that you may not think I am misled by rhetoric or am an academic apologist for war.

In June 1913 I happened as a passing tourist to sit in the French Chamber of Deputies during the great debate between

M. Jean Jaures, the leader of the socialist party and the foremost advocate of universal peace, and M. Barthou, First Minister of the Republic, on the question of the three-year law. This measure, designed in some degree to meet the formidable preparations which Germany was even then known to be making for war, was intended to keep the troops with the colors for a year longer and added to the armies on the frontiers some 250,000 combatants. In the name of humanity and in the most powerful speech against war and its horrors and in favor of disarmament that I have yet heard, M. Jaures hurled against the proposed law all the power of his unmatched eloquence and extraordinary erudition. The answer made was that a powerful neighbor would in all probability attack and that France might ere long be involved in a death struggle. The law was finally passed by a narrow margin, a great portion of the Chamber and a large part of the public siding with M. Jaures, bitterly opposing the three-year law as a product of militarism and the fears of its advocates as mere chimeras. In 1845 Charles Sumner had explained to a delighted audience that war was a thing of the past.

A year and a month later I happened to sit on a late July evening in a restaurant next to that in which the great leader and idol of the populace, Jaures, was in dastardly fashion assassinated. One might well have inferred wild fury among the populace, whose hopes, fancies and aspirations he had so long articulated. Yet the unexpected happened: Perfect quiet reigned everywhere and the man in the street contented himself with the remark that Jaures had been a dangerous dreamer and that in pursuance of his hopes for impossible peace, he would have disarmed the nation and perhaps completely sacrificed the national life.

I was much impressed by the juxtaposition of these two situations and could not but realize that if France, in addition to the tremendous odds already against her in those August days, had been still short 250,000 first line men, desperate indeed would have been the situation.

I have no doubt that Jean Jaures was as sincere, as earnest, as patriotic as any of our citizens who scoff at the thought of possible war and deride the attempt to make due preparation therefor.

I had illustrations of the futility of relying on mere words which people in this country who have not seen it cannot realize. I remember one hot August day last summer finding at a French Railway station an unfortunate peasant woman, sitting there crying. Somebody standing by said: "This woman has been there twenty-four hours." I asked her where she came from and what she had been doing, and she said she was a poor working woman; that she had heard the bombs and the guns at Charleroi and that her husband was in the house sick at the time. I said, "Why didn't you leave when you heard the bombs and the guns?" She said: "Sir! Leave my home! I knew nothing about war. Where should I go? My father, my grand-father, and their ancestors had died in the same bed. My husband and I have no place else. We thought that the guns might stop, and so we stayed. But," she said, "an officer came and said 'Your house will be burned in a few minutes; you must go,'" and then she said, "I took my husband who had been bedridden for a year, and I carried him as far as I could and got him on a train; and now the French officers have taken him away to the hospital in that little village, and they won't let me in, and I must stay here; I cannot go away." I said to her, "Madam, have you no children?" and she looked at me and said: "No, the little ones in Belgium have suffered too much. The only blessing that God has conferred upon me is that I have no children." Here is what defenselessness and reliance on "scraps of paper" may lead to; the women of a nation reach a point where they thank God that they have no children. I take it that no American, for any mere matter of expenditure, wishes to risk, under any circumstances, the possibility of American women having to cry out that their only blessing is that they have no children.

America stands for international law and international right. America is a nation peculiar to itself, because its nationality is not predicated, as the nationalities of many European nations are, upon consanguinity, people cemented together because of a common racial inheritance going back for centuries. Not so America. The American nationality is composed of every kind of blood. But its nationality is even stronger because it is founded upon common principles; and if you can attack and

destroy those principles, then you strike at the root of American nationality more directly than though you killed thousands of Americans. And when America is ready to go back on those common National principles that fought the Revolution and that fought the Civil War—whether they renounce those principles in the high-sounding name of Peace, which is not an honorable or decent peace, or on the ground of any other fallacy, watchword or slogan whatever—then they will have renounced that great heritage which the people of this country secured by standing together on a common platform of justice, law and humanity. A great nation possessing a common consciousness of right and wrong as to international law, as to international morality, as to the independence of states, and as to the great cardinal principles for which the flag stands, has no right to remain defenseless against nations based on other principles and armed to the teeth.

Until recently, conscious of American intention to do no nation injustice, secure in the thought that we desired no territory, our citizens were prone to think that no one would attempt to do them an injustice so great as to force war; to-day this opinion, so sorely shaken when the public law of Europe was set at defiance by the invasion and sack of unhappy Belgium, has now been wellnigh completely shattered by the destruction, upon the high seas, of hundreds of non-combatant passengers, a number of them American citizens.

Unwillingly are we confronted with the possibility that, whatever turn matters may take, some such catastrophic event may force us to defend ourselves. As the President recently put it, in those admirable words which so ably articulated the unanimity of a nation, there is "no threat lifted against any man, against any nation, against any interest but just a great solemn evidence that the force of America is the force of moral principle; that there is not anything else that she loves and that there is not anything else for which she will contend." Upon this moral principle we have erected our civilization; without it America has no meaning; defend it we must. Yet to maintain this position we are almost as unprepared as China from whom such a statement would scarce excite more than ridicule.

I do feel that American civilization is worth something; that its integrity and preservation are worth fighting for; I believe in the Monroe doctrine as far as it protects the Northern part of the continent, including Central America, from invasion by European powers; I believe in our right to determine our own standards for American citizenship and in our duty to uphold the highest standards of international law. Believing these things, I am convinced that without adequate methods of military defense, our policies, principles and purposes would go for nothing. In addition, we would be the victims of aggressions as certainly as China.

Nor do I fear the development of militarism in the United States, by which I mean, the subordination of moral forces and the dictates of international justice in which they have been crystallized, to a worship of mere material force. It would be inconceivable to my mind that the American people with their traditions, their nationality based upon common aspirations and ideas of equal justice, rather than on consanguineous heritage, can ever be dominated by mere desire for conquest and acquisition of power through force.

Nor is it possible that the very modest military establishment which the best opinion believes would be quite adequate to put this vast country beyond danger of foreign aggression should so far corrupt our fibre and distort our ideas that we would dethrone law among the Nations and substitute organized violence. These fears seem to me wholly chimerical, mere phantom creations of theorists and dreamers. The immediate return both of North and South to the pursuits of peace after the Civil War affords an illustration stronger than any academic logic-chopping of the innate distaste of our people for militant aggression and their devotion to the idea that the military force is a mere adjunct of civil law for the purpose of preserving the only peace worth having—peace consistent with individual liberty and national dignity.

It is because I think there are some things even worse than war and some things more precious than human life, that I believe the United States should have an army and navy strong enough to compel respect for justice, civilization and the security of small nations. I cannot think that the world

has improved much since Washington's time. The recent invasion of Belgium and the prosecution of the policy of "frightfulness" finally resultant in the Lusitania tragedy would not seem to indicate it.

Needless now to discuss details of organization. This must rest largely with experts. One thing alone is clear: Democracy is on trial. If it is incapable of defending itself, it must go the way of other systems. Justice, expediency, nay: necessity, will inevitably force us to the conclusion that manhood suffrage inevitably comports manhood service.

FREDERIC R. COUDERT.

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